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Soviet Spokesman Pledges Retaliation If U.S. Expels Moscow's U.N. Diplomats

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NEW YORK—Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov said the Soviet Union will promptly retaliate for Washington's expulsion of 25 Soviet diplomats at the United Nations if President Reagan doesn't rescind the order, which takes effect tomorrow.

His statement in an interview that Moscow must protect its "prestige," coupled with U.S. determination to reduce Soviet espionage, has complicated efforts to solve disputes over the Soviet detention of a U.S. journalist in Moscow and President Reagan's expulsion of the U.N. diplomats.

A U.S. official said Mr. Gerasimov's threat is probably designed to increase the pressure on Washington to quickly accept a solution to these disputes on terms acceptable to Moscow, so as to prevent an escalation. He conceded, however, that if Moscow carries out its threat, it could spark a chain of recriminations that could delay for at least several months the superpower summit that Mr. Reagan had hoped to hold in December.

The Soviets at the very least would like the U.S. to postpone its Wednesday deadline for the expulsion of the U.N. diplomats accused of espionage, rather than be forced into countermeasures and a serious worsening of relations at a time of rare opportunity for arms-control agreements. Administration officials wouldn't comment on the possibility of a delay.

Secretary of State George Shultz and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze have stepped up efforts to reach an agreement before Mr. Shevardnadze's departure from the U.S. tomorrow on the continued detention in Moscow of U.S. News & World Report correspondent Nicholas Daniloff. He was arrested and accused of espionage several days after the U.S. arrested Soviet U.N. employee Gennadi Zakharov in New York on similar charges.

Messrs. Shultz and Shervardnadze met last night in New York for the fourth time in the past week. State Department officials wouldn't comment on the meeting.

Both sides suggested some headway has been made, and recent progress in arms-control talks in Europe has given Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev added incentive to solve these disagreements quickly. But Mr. Shultz has said negotiations have become so complex that they could be lengthy.

Meanwhile, Mr. Reagan in a speech to the National Security Agency, the electronic intelligence-gathering organization, also was taking a tough line. He said the U.S. would "root out" foreign spies and "punish them severely." In a clear reference to the Daniloff case, he said the U.S. won't tolerate "imprisonment of innocent American citizens in retaliation for protecting ourselves from espionage."

Mr. Gerasimov said Mr. Gorbachev would make any final decisions on the U.N. issue but that the Soviet leader is prepared to strike back. He suggested the possibility of expelling alleged U.S. spies from Moscow, saying, "We have the names." He said Moscow also could remove U.S. journalists from Moscow or refuse to buy contracted U.S. grain.

U.S. officials doubt Moscow would expel Americans, saying it could only lose in a contest of such moves because of its larger number of U.S.-based diplomats.

Mr. Gerasimov, however, said Moscow would nevertheless respond, because Mr. Reagan's action in cutting its U.N. Mission was taken "in such a way to affect our prestige." He added, "No one wants to be pushed around."

His references to prestige, however, conceal a perhaps greater Soviet concern that the expulsions and any further cuts in Moscow's U.N. staff ordered by the U.S. would seriously hurt a crucial espionage operation. Administration officials say 35% of the more than 200 members of Moscow's mission here are engaged in intelligence gathering, much of it aimed at learning about sophisticated U.S. technology.

Mr. Gerasimov said the Soviets have already reduced their mission staff to 203, well below the total of 218 that the U.S. demanded be reached by this week in its original order during the summer. Two weeks ago, however, the U.S. identified 25 diplomats by name as among those who must leave. It said it did so because Moscow hadn't indicated whether it would meet the U.S. demand and the Soviet U.N. ambassador had suggested it wouldn't.

Administration officials said all of the 25 were involved in espionage, but the announcement also appeared to be timed to increase pressure on Moscow to release Mr. Daniloff.

The Soviet Union and U.N. officials have said the U.S. expulsion order naming the 25 diplomats is illegal. They said the U.S.'s host-country agreement with the U.N. stipulates that the U.S. can expel individual diplomats only after providing the U.N. secretary general with justification for the move. Mr. Shultz, however, has insisted that the U.S. action is legal.

Separately, the Senate approved a nonbinding resolution calling on President Reagan to secure Mr. Daniloff's "unconditional release" before agreeing to any summit with the Soviet leader.

The resolution, adopted 57-26, also urges that any new economic or trade agreements between the two countries be delayed until the Daniloff case is resolved.

Opponents said the resolution might hamper arms negotiations and could delay a summit even if the Soviets agreed to make Mr. Daniloff's status a main topic of discussion at any such meeting.

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